Desperate Measures

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Desperate Measures

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Summary

Roleplay between ethicallyaskew and nigellecter.
Will / Nigel. Nigel in his post-canon state, before S3 happens in NBC Hannibal.

Chapter 1

Romania was beautiful, but severe; and Will wondered, if he scratched the surface, if he would find something ugly underneath. He had never been the sort of man to drink on the job, but he wasn't working now, was he? Will could feel the fresh scar tissue smiling across his stomach as he walked over to the bar, sliding his empty glass across the battered surface.

Then what sort of crazy is he?!

Jack's voice rattled around in his skull like a dried pea, bringing a raw, private smile to his mouth. What sort, indeed. What kind of crazy did you need to be, to travel halfway across the world, looking for… He wasn't even sure. Catharsis. Maybe. Revenge. Honestly, Will would have been happy just to have Hannibal's voice out of his head.

The bartender grunted something, and pressed the cold refill into Will's hand. The drink didn't do much to drown the bastard out, but it took the edge off his empathy; it gave Will a bit of distance from the rest of the world, and the way it greedily pressed at his brain. Clutching at slivers of his psyche, like they could consume him with their emotions.

Turning away from the bar, Will blinked hard, his glass sliding a handful of dangerous inches, before his suddenly numb fingers tightened on the slippery surface. There was a man in the doorway; tall and lean, with angular features that Will knew. Oh, too well. Sickly, he could imagine how the man's face would look with a slanted smirk, or smoothly thoughtful.

"That's new.." He muttered to himself, turning away, and taking his seat in the corner once more. Will had known for months that he wasn't a reliable narrator for his own impressions, but he'd never hallucinated Hannibal quite that clearly before. A glance in a crowd, sure, but this man was almost flesh and blood.

And then he was. And it was like looking into a carnival mirror.

The voice was similar, too damn similar, but *not the same* . Close, but no cigar, he told himself, choking back bile tinged laughter. Sure, they said that everyone in the world had a twin, but he had never taken it quite so literally before.

Will wasn't sure what sort of liquor the bartender had given him, but it tasted like burnt matches, and scorched the back of his throat. Across the crowded room, he watched the doppleganger glance his way– probably feeling the weight of Will's gaze on the back of his neck, he thought wryly– and something fundamental felt like it snapped in Will's chest.

He wasn't sure how long they watched one another. In sidelong glances; a look, an aversion; a thread between them, laced through the smoky interior of the bar. Bringing his glass to his lips, the dim light slanting off the lenses of his glasses, Will wondered if the Man could feel Hannibal's presence on him. If he could sense the bitterness ground into his flesh.

The cord between them felt like fish hooks in his skin. And Will wanted no part of it.

Leaving his seat, Will tossed a handful of coins at the bartender, and made his way to the door. And he stifled a shudder as he heard the Man's chair scrape across the gritty floor.

He wasn't sure what the Man thought he would find. But maybe there were some things you just needed to bleed out.

—

Having reduced to being incapacitated and out of commission for six months with his gutted side, he thought his fortuitous streak of taking over the club with an iron fist with Darko had finally ran out. Dogged by a streak of misfortune, the reinvigorated curse crackled into his life and effervesced fully like a sweeping wildfire when he had dropped *seemingly* dead at the hydroelectric dam, the drug cartel mistaking him for an opposite faction.

The narrow shape of the bullet managed to evade the fatal spots and also, the yaw maintains a tight spiral, which had enabled it to pass right through the tissues without causing too much secondary damage. The characteristic entry wound as the bullet makes a through and through, it seems fatal and the trajectory and shock-wave suggests otherwise. Dropping unconscious as his widened hazel swirls with faint mist, it grows muddled with dense stream of crimson, gleaming bright as day like black opal under the full moon with the reflection of the flickering light from the light fixture, welcoming strangers into a grim figure of the city.

Bun venit la București.

His case is very few and far between, as his kiss of death must have a jolting effect on the opposite side of the earth; his brother's 'Kitchen Nightmare,' the headline had been all over the news when he had been making hay while the sun shines through his deeply unconscious mind, the consistent, everlasting battle finally won. The victory called for a celebration with his vital machine's beeping sound and the IV drops making a sonorous serenity upon the new and brighter day. Finally, he would rise like a resurrected phoenix, breaking the shackles that tied his appendages to be dormant for another six months.

There had been too much to attend to by himself once he had been recuperated well enough to take over some of his previous jobs. He had been supposed to meet a former associate of his, turned another criminal mastermind. He had relocated to another country, under the scrutiny of international police, the man had been a prime suspect of executioner-style murder of two Bulgarian private investigators, who were trailing one of the most notorious drug trafficking businesses.

The abrupt cancellation of business meeting respires a familiar lick of fury, the ring of perspiration accentuating recently touched pin-up girl tattoo aligning his carotid. The single prominent feature that would separate his Chesapeake Ripper twin from the criminal kingpin Nigel Lecter.

Perched on the stool and considerably taking easy on the booze as he hadn't still fully recovered from the buzzing sensation of wasps muddling between the cracks of his brain, his piercing luster breaks the ectoplasm of smoke, conjoining the crystallized exhale he puffs, he manifests more as a black leopard who just briskly had chased a prey and failed to catch one

as the other had scuttled away afar. He could literally scent Hannibal's familiar cologne and the prospect of death.

And an epiphany, a recognition hits him like a head-to-head collision.

Pretending to burn another cigarette, he beelines through the door. No outwardly hurriedness present in his easy and long strides. Pivoting around and casually hindering the other to make his hasty escape, he chews on the filter of the cigarette and presses his back against the door frame. The revolver's chamber pushes into the dimple of his spine.

Circling around the loop never his forte, his graveled, guttural voice, thick and drawling with Romanian accent breaks the bustling ambiance.

"Will Graham. How fucking honored to be face-to-face with the most empathetic profiler who drove my *dear brother* to abdicate."

Chapter 2

On some level, Will had never actually expected to get out of the bar alive. Just like he had started to embrace the quiet serenity of bleeding out in the middle of Hannibal Lecter's kitchen. There would have been a chill irony in that, he had reminded himself a dozen times since he woke up; but no, apparently even Fate itself danced to the demanding tune of the damned doctor.

What he hadn't expected, however (the first surprise in a long line of miserable, half-seen-coming moments) was the distinctive pressure of the barrel of a gun, slotting itself neatly between his L2 and L3 vertebrae.

God save me from fucking criminally minded Lithuanians.

Will's fingers tightened on the door handle; they were eloquent hands, with long, tapered fingers and a slender palm, and blunt nails that seemed to have taken the worst of a beating. Worn hands, that didn't shake when Nigel twisted the muzzle into his spine.

"Avenging him? It's a waste of your time. Dr. Lecter is more than capable of engineering his own revenge."

Will said, the words punctuated with the quiet click of the door, a rush of bitter, Romanian winter air flooding through. His voice was low, but not particularly soft– a level voice, like rising to Nigel's implied threat wasn't on his to-do list that day.

It was a bleak thought, but at least when he had a gun to his back, Will knew where the threat was. The man behind him sounded uncannily similar, but the accent was wrong. It was rougher, harsher, with clipped English and a smirking drawl that he didn't particularly want to see.

"Besides, you shouldn't read the Tattler. Freddie is a remarkably inaccurate reporter. It was less of an abdication, more of an *expeditious retreat* . With his pretty blonde therapist. A vacation."

—

Mindlessly, his fingers roam over in a ghastly touch upon almost imperceptible halo of a scar, the entry wound effectively disguised with a faint sheen of sweat plastering his matted ashen locks smack-dab on the forehead. Thanks to its state-of-the-art facility and the most utmost care of the neurologist and a surgeon, he would be relatively unscathed and almost fully recovered from the physiological discrepancies. Atrophied muscles regained their functions, he had packed on more muscles through extensive physical therapy and his own share of training. Although he had a strong inclination to blow off something, both in his personal and professional life, one thing was for sure; when it came to Dr. Hannibal Lecter, things took a dramatic turn, much for worse.

Without Will's knowledge, they had shared one crucial thing. The incomparable tranquility of exsanguinating along with the quickening lub-dub of their hearts. The gnarled flesh, a single reminder of brushing with mortality. In the most weakened state, retaliation wasn't the foremost thing that brimmed over his bubbling vessel, usually full of erratic thoughts, *blowing hot and cold* .

The sensation could be translated more like a spark of curiosity, his grasp around the trigger taut, along with the sparkle of his soulful hazel that matches the sunlight and the dusty plain; the wind stirring the surface. Then the hurtling shadows of clouds sweep over the glistening pupils. The extension of self retracts along with his penetrative gaze, sharpened arrows, only to be poised towards the target with precision, *save another day* .

"I don't need to do his fucking grunt work. More like breaking out in hives of heartache. He's losing his shit."

There would be no reason in coming to terms with the fact that Hannibal's departure had been foreseen. With his adamant stronghold to remain within his home-ground - where he belonged, must have put more than a dent in gloating and smug bastard's composure. After all, they were alone without each other and no matter how they erupted against each other's plates in their own method and the butterfly effect would be felt throughout every tasks - of their trial and error, to mend their shattering relationship.

"Footloose and fancy-fucking-free I see. As adaptive and beastly savage Hannibal occasionally gets, he is, after all, confined within the receptacle of his exotic extravagance. It could be his blessing in disguise, or an utter downfall."

His movement as fluid as all-burning lava flowing downhill, he watches the tobacco's orange glow before letting the dispersing gray trail puff towards Will's direction. "Now that I know that asshole is pleasuring himself in a welcome respite along with vintage wines and white truffles, shall we talk more about the primary agenda for both of us?"

Chapter 3

He's losing his shit .

Will wasn't a man that laughed often. In the last several months there had been precious few things he found the right kind of amusing; a sardonic, bitter sort of humour that paired nicely with the artistically curving smile that Hannibal had left to remember him by.

Slowly, as the pressure of the gun against his spine began to ease (or maybe he was just getting used to it, he thought absently) the corner of Will's mouth began to curl upwards. It wasn't a smile, that dry, gallows expression was a million miles from happy. But as smirks went, it was a decent start.

"I wouldn't know,"

He lied smoothly, remembering the living, vital energy of the human topiary that Hannibal had so generously shaped for them. It was fucking rude to carve reminders in living people. Especially when you left them alive enough to be reminded. Every damn day.

Hives of heartache.

Darkly, Will wondered if this doppleganger had the same raw, Hannibal-shaped holes in him. Bullets of his own chic design, that left shrapnel that you spent the rest of your life trying to pick out. They were infectious splinters, driving in and making themselves at home, until you weren't even sure how to remove them, and didn't know if you could live with them.

"Italy seems to agree with him. He can surround himself with the best of his taste, and imagine that he's a God amongst insects. Not sure what that makes us."

Five minutes, and they were already *us* . Will tried to ignore the fishhooks that caught his skin, and grabbed at his ribs.

With a flash, and the sizzle of hot ashes on the damp sidewalk, Will stepped forward, out into the dark night and away from the gun at his spine. Snow drifted down in grey, wet blobs, clinging to the curb and washing wetly into the gutters. It was an ugly night, the kind that encouraged people to stay indoors. Clearly, they were not *most people.*

"You're the one with the gun, I think that means you're also the one that sets the agenda. "

With a few more steps, Will let the bar door close behind them, his face tilted up to the sulfur yellow glow of the streetlights. He didn't want to turn around. As long as he didn't look, he could just focus on the differences. The accent, the turn of phrase (eloquent, in his own way. That was damn ironic) the acrid scent of smoke. As long as Will didn't look, he could ignore his own Hannibal-shaped wound.

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Perhaps the third time would be the charm. That decisive strike that would perforate him down to the limbo that he belongs in; he always promoted the idea of himself being at the indestructible iron gates of fire and brimstone with his distinguishable gait of the times. He would be along there soon enough. Having wrapped in both guilt-striken vengeance and unfettered imageries of those killers worse than pigs. Hannibal and himself were both manifestations of negative tropism. Nothing had happened to him as he continued the streak of gruesome killings; with each bloodshed, matched a drop of his flayed heart to be mended and he saw Mischa's gnarled flesh akin to mummified limb, sticking out from the age-old soil of the *Lecter Dvaras* , now encompassed with the haunting reminder of the past in a whiff of smoke, the floating world having gone up in flames.

The familiar subtle click of the hammer releases the tension applied through the back of the bullet, as well as with the straining stiffness along his spine; the flickering crimson light blaring with warning dissipating into the red thick gaze that is his fanciful musing.

Still lost in a bit of reverie, he percolates about the past tense encounter; Hannibal in his usual austere three-piece, the fortified human veil is above and beyond the call of duty. It leaves him in a bitter resentment; one must admit, there's a speck of bottled up hate shattering in a million pieces. Despite the thunderous claps among his heart, the looming silence had turned into a conversation of its own.

"Oh, I beg to fucking differ. As immeasurable his narcissistic ego gets, I couldn't stop myself from registering the widening crevice in his heart."

He's wearing a more than functional and spiffy holster, courtesy of Hannibal, but he disregards it as if it didn't exist and shoves it back in his usual crude fashion. Unclasping the sheath from the belt and discarding it, there goes along the useless and unnecessary intricate web of thoughts. Blanks fired with contumelious anger. The holster itself had been the solstice of their striking differences coming to a consensus.

"That makes us *parasites* . Breathing in the same fucking air, we're barely within a little over an hour in distance."

God amongst insects . Now he can't wonder if Will had inflicted such acrimonious carving of betrayal.

A lazy drawl intensifying with each surge of nicotine, he taps at the cigarette, aglow streetlights scintillate the muddy cityscape. The chronological of his life had never been a vivid watercolor - it had been all tumultuous, malleable like a mind of a child. The chiaroscuro of lights and darks, along with pastiched fragments of memories sewed upon by each dear individual.

"Then the course of our destination is already taken into account. To my flat it is."

Chapter 4

That made them parasites, did it? Will thought to himself, running the bitter, brittle edged words through his mind, waiting for them to lose their meaning with repetition. They didn't, and he wasn't really surprised. Sometimes he *felt* like a parasite, standing out here in the dark, dirty street, in a country where he only spoke enough of the language to keep from getting shot.

Alright, not considering the gun that had been pressed into the small of his back a moment before. That was an extenuating circumstance, damnit.

Will wanted to say *that's a lot of anger you have.* Feeling the emotions bleeding off the other man like an arterial wound, flooding through his empathy; it was like drowning in overripe wine, too potent, turning sour like vinegar in the back of his throat. But those words felt like a betrayal of.. this. Whatever it was.

With rules he didn't think either of them understood, and the drag of a connection that had propelled the nameless man out of his chair in the bar, and into the dark, cold night.

"Parasites are fucking resilient. You really have to work to kill them."

Will remembered the last time he had seen Hannibal in the flesh; just like he could remember the arms that had folded around him, warm, like the blood that had spilled from his open wound. Tighter than reality, with a phantom persistence that he could still feel, if he tried.

For a moment, the rational part of Will's mind; the fractured piece of himself that still whispered defiantly that the hallucinations weren't real, and tried to guide him back to sanity, screamed at him. Warning him that going off to a strange apartment, with a man who's name he didn't even know.. Was a good way to wind up in a bathtub full of ice, and a missing organ, or two.

It was something he had seen before. And had no wish to experience first hand.

Slowly, Will turned towards the man, stifling a jolt at the eerily familiar features. Sharp cheekbones and dark eyes, with a generous slash of a mouth.

"You know my name." He finally said, falling into step beside the much taller man,

"What's yours?"

They were simple words, but they rang with subtext. *If I see you, I won't see him.*

—

Those lingering thoughts consume his mind and turns into a coagulated glob of milk gone sour. With the right amount of benevolence in his part would transform the unpalatable concoction into something passable, it wasn't going to happen in the imminent future. Not

when all the bitter resentment continued to scab away from his body, more like a flaring candle emitting his brooding scent.

That unpleasant feeling in his throat and no matter how hard he tries, so much pressure has built up inside the folded larynx and the sensation escalates. The tumultuous path of unconventional relationship, both capable of being the puppeteer and quasi-objective of being manipulated, had ended with the biggest outburst of temperance.

Even when every pulverized piece pastiched together, the former glory of the contingency nature of their relationship would become that of a Frankenstein.

With each passing inflation of his fluttering heartbeat, he would feel the serrated edge of the curved silver; dull and crude, yet gleaming with sole intention ingrained within effortless crescent movement of the perpetrator. To separate and eviscerate his left side in a sweeping curve akin to a taut bow, just adequate enough to drag him through the gate of limbo. Each spurt of sanguine acts as a catalyst for explosive anger streaming down with a downpour.

The frustration tauts, the recurrent snapshots of himself reel from the back of his eyeballs like a slideshow, more like a crime scene he was more than capable of recreating.

It's not the amount of blood and the rusty revolting scent of stagnancy that prevents him from retracting his gaze. It's the humiliating condition that he is left in, that had made him resilient and effusive with redundant anger. Once, he had eaten dirt, the other times, his refusing soul gazed into an abyss.

"Tapeworms have a masterful propensity to take over its oblivious host and presumably suck the fucking life out of one. Hannibal Lecter deserves to suffer. I am starting to think you have given him what he had coming. *Quid pro quo,* hm? I am a firm believer in that philosophy."

All he had recalled from the tabloid headline had been the other's name and the crimson floor of Hannibal's familiar kitchen, where he too, had been faced with the mythical creature defined as *emaciated, desiccated creature of death and corruption.*

Through the slurry bleakness of the muddy snow, he gazes upon the half-reflection, the epitome of insatiable greed and hunger.

"Nigel. Consider me the champion scum of the earth."

Chapter 5

Quid pro quo .

Will could feel the gallows smile, dry and sardonic and bitter, as it laced across his mouth. That's what they had been doing for months; bits of information, the lure in his side, trading slices of his soul for the chance to… Bind him? Undo him? Stop him from hurting anyone else?

Well, if that was the case, he had failed spectacularly.

"Tapeworms are like *quid pro quo*. Their eggs are microscopic. You give the tiny thing an inch, and the next thing you know, it's gnawing on you from the inside. It gets bigger, as you get smaller."

The more they talked, the more he liked Nigel. The man was bitter and abrasive, with emotions that rubbed Will's empathy raw with their demanding. He wore himself bare, with an armor of curses and clipped, smart words; with a shirt that Hannibal would rather die than wear, and the sort of brutal honesty that he had long since culled out of his personality.

Will could feel the weight of his words vibrate through the air between them; like a thread plucked hard, and left to shiver out its single note. It made him tense, like tactile syllables, all of Nigel's words printed on his skin. *See me. See me.*

He had been staring at shadows and ghosts for so long, seeing Hannibal in the worn places his hands had touched. Nigel was the realest thing Will had encountered in months. He was flesh and bone, and the rustle of his jacket at they moved through the dark, snowy street.

"Nigel."

The name suited him, and Will didn't hold a hand out to him. He pressed the name over his lips like it was something interesting, tracing the taste of the consonants on his tongue. Now they knew each other's names. Quid pro quo, indeed.

"If I'd given him what he deserved, then I wouldn't have been the one bleeding out on the floor. But he was *generous* enough to leave him something to remember him by."

Will unconsciously pressed a hand over his stomach, The damp, falling snow had caught in his dark curls, like someone had held a salt shaker over his head; and a flash of pale blue behind the lenses of his glasses, as he watching Nigel out of the corner of his eye.

Part of him wanted to ask where the apartment was, but it just didn't need important enough at that moment.

"If Hannibal is suffering, then it's because it amuses him to do it. A novel experience that he doesn't generally indulge in. There isn't enough tapeworms in the world, Nigel, to consume his monstrous ego."

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His lashes had barely, imperceptibly fluttered. Having Hannibal as his twin had been both a blessing and a curse. Every routinely thing they did together could turn into a can of worms and there had been a sinister note to all the impeccable severity that would become shackles and restraints for him to endure. Coming to a suitable compromise, he had partaken his own becoming with sober acceptance. With each sliver of Hannibal's human veil unraveling like he would of most fragile relic in the world, Nigel's own shucked off like he would chuck mounds of oysters. Jabbing, twisting, searching. Growing ever flippant, the superficiality only poured more gasoline over the blazing of the hearth within his heart.

The crux of the matter had been, even long before Hannibal's diversion from himself, so to speak; the more or less normal version of the two. Less refined, brutish, violent and prone to surrendering to his raw, brutally frank portrayal of human passions.

"I had felt more like a considerable-sized tapeworm shrinking inside of him, rather than growing to metastasize through all of his major organs. It had both been unmeaningful and insignificant. I would only be aware of my own fucking fly in the ointment."

How do you ever come across the man who states nothing happened to him, but he happened? Hannibal was his *own* creation. No wretched calamity nor traumatization would mold him to what fallen angel his brother had became. With no cooperation and moderation.

He had miserably failed in that he had lost his authenticity as a parasite; its nature nullified. Instead of trying to change his twin, he had changed into a pungent, acrid puddle of noxious venom. Even a chance encounter corroded his character as his words spread like a pernicious disease.

The fucking love, and its excessive baggage of his contumelious hate . His body would completely drain of Lecter blood and still respire with both over-brimming pride and compacted rollercoaster of emotions, untranslatable stacks upon another.

"In the process of attempting so, I splayed myself open for Hannibal, for him to excavate whatever he fucking pleased. The thought of aspiring along with him crossed my mind, but ultimately I was the one who plummeted and became a rag doll."

His clashing outfit, a wiener dog patterned shirt with garish colors with leather jacket, rendered useless with seeping moisture, he beckons with his sharp chin as he rounds the corner of a quiet intersection. "Fifth floor, a walk-up, right this way."

Chapter 6

This part of the city was old and rough, pockmarked with small walkways and allies that bled like a maze into one another. Laundry like streamers froze in the cold air, a skin of frost dulling the bright colours. It was a damp cold with a biting breeze that only promised to get colder as the night wore on.

Will didn't mind it. If you were uncomfortable, then you were probably still awake. And alive. Two things he didn't take for granted so much these days.

"He likes to do that. What's the point of being a sadistic bastard, if you don't have an audience to appreciate your work? And who better than the person you're slicing up? They have front row seats. He's turned waking vivisection into an art."

It was gallows humour, like two men hanging from their crosses, comparing fatal wounds before they turned gangrenous and died. Holding up the dissected, bloody pieces of themselves to the only person who could understand what it had felt like. Religion. Or communion, but with a scalpel.

"He doesn't want to be alone. Maybe he thought that if he collected enough pieces of us– cherry picking the best, of course– that he'd be able to make himself a whole person."

Will crossed the road, his quicker steps finding pace with Nigel's longer ones. Whatever this was, he thought, it would be better with a roof over their heads. The streets here seemed to have eyes, people watching from windows and speculating. It made the hair on the back of his neck prickle.

Stepping into the building was a relief. The stairwell was chilly, and smelled of stale Romanian cigarette smoke, their footsteps echoing dully as they climbed from one landing to the next.

The silence between them wasn't a strained, awkward thing; but it waited. Like the pause before the punchline of a sick joke, the silence had an energy of its own. It hummed on Will's skin, like the buzz of a wasp; waiting, until the click of Nigel's apartment door sounded behind them.

"You're not a rag doll."

Will said calmly, leaning back against the door. His cheeks were red from the cold outside, a few slushy snowflakes still clinging to the shoulders of his jacket. The light through the windows slanted on his glasses, obscuring the expression behind them; his quiet voice betraying little.

"Maybe you're missing pieces, even vital ones. But rag dolls just fold over and die, and you're still alive. It's not your fault Hannibal doesn't have enough emotional bleeding to feed even himself, much less a parasite. We just chose the wrong host."

—

This sector of Bucharest couldn't be the perfect summation of chronology of his life; with the ugly wretched past of communism and the reconstructed, restored, a sorry hapless attempt made to mask all the shortcoming of the tainted streak. In essence, no place better defined him with the matching milieu; it was grim, gloomy, with striking contrast of hierarchical social statuses, with enough luminosity to have the tolerance of having defined itself as Paris of Eastern Europe.

There was not an ounce of comfort in that, and with Hannibal, he delighted in tolerating partaking of the arts and all the excess baggage that followed.

Of course, no doubt he was resilient and obtained all the characteristic of a champion parasite. E *ndurance, potency, an expanding nature, a temperament of engrossment* .

His long-stride, more of a drag than an effortful attempt to carry himself into his own safe sanctuary, now more so transformed into a dank muculent den of a wounded animal.

"And with his expedient vacation along with the pretty blonde, his audience spectrum broadened. He would be gloating as he carries another formidable title with his already infamous title. All the variations hold its utmost importance."

In that inevitable course of action, Hannibal will surely deluge himself with even more barren solitude, more so, desolate loneliness.

"And for him, a sufficient company doesn't come across easily. By blood, I had been an ephemeral one," he accesses. "That fucking smile on your stomach proves that you, had been one unparalleled contender among myriads of worthless insects."

It doesn't mean he had failed when he felt like having been defeated. His own arduously severe footstep becomes whispers from his past, the eerie howl of the wind, the ominous projectile of the bullet - wayward with life or death.

"Perhaps, will there ever be a suitable one, the one who would surpass his cheeky slyness and askant ethics?"

With jangling key tossed across the threshold of the couch, faded and dusted with a faint layer of dust, suspended in air.

"Whiskey?" His voice cracks a little, and the radiating ripple upon unperturbed expanse of his pensive bubble over as he rounds the corner of the kitchenette.

The back of his eyeballs become pins and needles as he rubs over the faint scarring.

Chapter 7

Romania was a world away from any country Will had ever let foot in. It was gritty and defensive; a place where the Eastern Orthodox church fought tooth and nail against deeply rooted superstition. Where people crossed their hands over their hearts with one breath, and warded off the evil eye with the next.

Nigel didn't strike Will as a devout.

That fucking smile on your stomach…

Well, Will had already suspected that he read the Tattler. The brutal, gory crime scene photos from Hannibal's house were sickly fascinating. How Freddie had managed to get there before the clean-up team, Will wasn't sure. But there was a reason she was the Queen of the maggots, after all.

"That smile is a *happy* reminder of why you don't let Hannibal into your head. There's still a nasty voice in my skull that sounds disturbingly like him. And I don't think it's ever coming out."

In the dark, the apartment looked like the sort of place you came to sleep. It was functional, only just, an utilitarian. Like bolt-hole you could crawl into, and let your body sink into unconsciousness. A small eddy of dust rose up from the worn couch as Will sat on the arm, watching Nigel as he moved into the tiny kitchenette.

"Alright.. I'm not sure what that bartender was giving me, but it tasted like burnt matches and cocktail syrup. Not a taste you forget…"

"How's your head?"

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There are many things that would tick him off without any describable or explainable reason. The agitated anger just spew over as if the carbonation had been fizzing over the span of unforeseen time - like a storm of vengeful fury brewing inside the core of his existence. That's why he much preferred to be alone; and it was healthy for him, too (minus his self-destruction). Stepping into the personal boundary of Hannibal Lecter had him to be defined in whole. Surely, his brother wouldn't have to write an extensive tome to reduce him down to few decisive and eloquent sentences.

Most often, his curiosity would turn out to be a double-edged sword and inflict fatal evisceration upon himself. He almost wishes to ask Will to remove his shirt so he could be face-to-face, encounter the pouring sorrow of his brother, that familiar bitterness of betrayal etched upon the flesh to be reminded of the day.

His own had been ingrained between the ridges and folds of his brain, in the form of *metamorphosis* and *accommodation* .

His own marring of the flesh, a result of a sticky widget involving his profession, had exactly taken inside the very place he heard the news about that bloodshed. Three gravely injured, no fucking trace of Hannibal anywhere in the sight. The same fucking kitchen knife that had been used to inflict the wound upon the gnarled ugliness.

“Would my striking likeness remind you of him? I am not a particularly a big fan of his brand of manipulation and its accoutrements.”

The penumbra crawls upon the dusted floor, mirroring his treading steps of a child, the foliage trampling underfoot as his exhausted steps become more of series of drag.

Taking out two tumblers and pouring a copious amount, more than two standard fingers of whiskey, the amber swish with his precise movement. Even such prosaicness has its meaning elevated when he thinks of observing Hannibal’s flick of wrist, pouring vintage wine.

“Just like the adulterated crap you drank, an amalgamation of a tong prodding and poking through in poor attempt to retrieve the bullet. It continues to whirl and lodge further as the urge to pluck that fucking thing out of there intensifies.”

I can’t get him out of my fucking head.

Chapter 8

The apartment was tiny, and filled with shadows. Up on the fifth floor they didn't shudder and crawl across the floor, sliding up the walls, when cars passed by. The shadows here were too high to fall victim to the sulfurous glow of the street lights; a tower looking out on the Bucharest slums. Grimy windows filtered out the world, the only illumination coming from the pallid, greyish ambient glow from the rest of the city.

Will could have turned on the light. There was a switch by the door they had come in, it would have been simply– just a flip. A twitch of his finger. But the dark seemed safer, letting eyes simply.. Pass over them.

"You look like him, but it's only skin deep. You *feel* completely different. Besides, Hannibal would never be caught dead in a bowling shirt. If you can stand looking at yourself in the mirror, I can stand looking at you."

It wasn't as hard as he had thought it would be. Nigel's emotions were a blunt, battering force; the sort that Will could feel humming and shivering through his head. The only time Hannibal had ever felt like that…

No. He was *not* going down that path.

The corners of Will's mouth jumped with a sardonic smile, watching Nigel pour the liquor, sloshing against the sides, into the glass. He had beautiful hands; long fingered and hard, they were capable hands. His own felt too small as he reached for the glass, the solid weight of it balanced against his knee.

For a moment, Will watched the shadows seem to spill up through his fingers, like Abigail's blood. Relentless and flooding, with the taste of copper in the back of his throat.

Reflexively, he took a rough swallow of whiskey, washing the taste back.

"You're not supposed to. If Hannibal dislikes you, he kills you– it's simple, clean. He doesn't usually fuck with his victims before they die. It's the people he *likes* that have the problems. He wants to be sure that you'll never forget him, so he picks out bits of your brain and makes a home there.'

"I spent months behind bars, trying to get his voice out of my head. Obviously, it didn't work. I tried to have him killed– and almost succeeded. Part of me thought that it might help… Looking back, I don't think it would have."

If it hadn't been for Abigail… Maybe he could have forgiven him. For everything else. But losing her again had been a bitter pill, her imago pinned to the inside of his skull.

"But he's 1,700 miles away." He added, looking up at Nigel with a flash of pale blue eyes, over the top of his glasses, "And we're here."

___

With an unreadable expression spreading over his facade as his diaphanous orbs, brewing and brimming with both yearning and jeremiad on the condition of things in general. The sinister change in the racing-world, his hurtling childhood and adolescence as he waltzed. Zipping through the curveballs and constantly trying to ground himself as a vehement oak that would stand strong in the midst of the whirling storm. Like a settling snow globe after a vigorous shake, but the less than unnoticeable imperfections etched across like the deep-rooted soil.

The illumination brought out all the flaws; as his habitat told more stories than his own *crude eloquence* would concoct. With trial and errors, like scars gracing his rather unblemished expanse of coppery tan, there had been disorder and distortion. The countless nights of tossing and turning, facing the hollowness of his heart and the essentiality of his limbs, organs and blood.

In his dream, he would be limbless, The phantasm of his pre-existing scythe-like grip would inflict and haunt him. As he tips his chin to take a swig, quenching the drought in his throat, a wide curve of a droplet licks over the inked surface.

The looming deluge of dark mountainous water is towering over him and he is thankful (and appreciative) of Will that he hadn't flicked on that outlet; as if that would make him even more so vulnerable with all the stripped layers of constructed personas.

"My own elevation and degradation, the likeness would throw anyone off their feet but most passerby aren't fucking interested in getting their hands dirty. They don't see beneath the dachshund patterns, scars and tattoos and term me as they see fit. I speculate *the good doctor* would be tempted to do that also."

Like Will, still within his peripheral vision without letting him invade his private pensive, Hannibal takes a considerable-sized room in his very mind. It would be effortless to trying to empty his mind. The mistakes, written strings of thoughts would still aggregate and turn into a condensed mist.

"He would take a part of me and make me a better part of himself; more so, a *lack* thereof. He once took a heart and a liver from a medical practitioner - for he had no sympathy and no intention of filtering out his contumelious remarks. l wonder what he'll take from me."

His death-grip might break the most fragile part of the bottle, the amber liquor sloshing in a manner of his turbulent mind. A smear from the hearthstone, a sore spot he can't seem to scratch.

"He could be in the opposite side of the fucking door, in the same continent or a lightyear away where we couldn't possibly reach. His existence alone is esemplastic in its nature." His slender finger tips the other's glass so that he would plummet into those cerulean aqueduct. "Now enlighten me about the *proxy* ."

Chapter 9

"You look like him. Can't argue with that. But considering his style, that shirt might actually be Hannibal repellent."

Will said with quiet bluntness, rocking his glass slowly between his hands to watch the liquor slosh against the sides. He used to be a man with such mercy; but those pieces of himself had been carefully excised and consumed by the doctor… What was left, Will wasn't entirely sure.

He wished he could say the same about Hannibal.

Will avoided his eyes. *I had a sister once… my charge…* Hannibal's voice was a constant in his head. And he didn't want to hear it right now.

Pushing himself to his feet, Will walked over to the grimy window, the streetlights a few stories below reflecting off the wet pavement. It painted his face in a faintly jaundiced light, scoring the already dark shadows beneath his eyes. For a long moment he didn't say anything, just staring out into the night; it would be early evening in Italy. And he didn't need to wonder… Not anymore… What Hannibal would be doing.

It was all there in his head. If he just chose to look.

The cup came to rest on the windowsill with a click, glass against the leaded sash. And Will fished his glasses from his face, letting them dangle between his fingers limply. His eyes felt gritty when he ground the heels of his hands against them, dry and blurry.

"You don't want to know what he'd take, Nigel. Trust me.'

"The proxy.. A fledgling serial killer. Came to me when I was on trial for your brother's…" Will trailed off for a moment, his gallows smile reflected in the window. "Artwork. Being in a mental hospital doesn't give you a lot of *scope* for your ambitions. Left me to rot in there, with half hidden memories flashing in my brain. Framed me for the death of our.. daughter."

In the corner of the room, Will could almost seen Abigail's shade. The concerned expression, and the way her wide eyes would flick back and forth between himself and Nigel. She had always been loyal to Hannibal…

His shoulders were tense, drawn up beneath his coat; a crack in his composure that widened, torn into, but his own words.

"Matt had the idea that, if he could kill Hannibal, than he could absorb the persona. *The Chesapeake Ripper* . Fucking ridiculous… When Hannibal woke up, he was splayed out like the crucifixion, wrists split, and standing on a wobbly bucket. With a rose around his neck.'

"Unfortunately, the cavalry arrived quick enough to save him."

—

He knows, deep down in his subconscious, one of the reasons - the most hard to ignore, in-your-fucking-face kind of one that governs his very soul in a death grip - had been to distinguish himself as much as possible from his aesthetically pleasing, flawlessly put-together bundle of aloof, arrogant alien that would be better off living in an alternate universe, away from all those worthless insects.

Letting himself loosen the tight grip he had placed upon with all the air of seriousness surrounding them with the topic of the most detached, yet freedom-loving loner, he isn't totally imprudent about the subject of Hannibal being forlorn even with the suitable company. The bereavement of their shared experiences become a dense, giant stream of obscurity, swirling thicker and wheeling by him to consume him.

Swallowing the liquor with its bitterness masking the subtle caramel saccharine notes, the burn becomes small flares of torches flaming in the mist. The dull throb gradually empty chariot barreling through the creases of his brain, the ingrained projectile of the bullet continues to draw cacophonous marks over and over again. Like that unpleasant scratching that makes him to immediately recoil with the booming shatter of rancid decomposition of his own brain matter and coagulated tissues.

He could materialize the gnarled extension of Mischa's limp appendages, sticking out and clanking against a cast-iron pot as the air spun with steam flooding the atmosphere. The deceptively savory and full-flavored consomme still seeping through his body to fuel his growth...

Taking a short bursts of quaff to prevent himself from vomiting the greasy Romanian meatball soup he just devoured before encountering Will, his sourpuss expression disappears behind a warm, quivering set of hands.

"I do not have the same penchant for his elevated display of performative installations. How ironic, *incorrigible* atrocities he would create with his micro-management. For the *gloating* love of fucking god, the things he does in the spited name of *love* ."

Although he had an access to Hannibal's coherent, yet fragmented strings of intentions, all was lost with what it seems to be a pressure building inside his brain, as if expanding to crack open the skull akin to egg inside the microwave.

"An antichrist hung, splayed open with a noose around his fucking neck. I speculate he didn't even flinch an eyebrow when he had admitted after all, he was the mastermind behind all those artworks."

Smoothing a tightly pinched fold of skin on the bridge of his nose, he imperceptibly turns over his shoulder, the bottleneck still clutched with whitening grasp. "And the cavalry you speak of, as obliviously idiotic he is, killed this Matty boy, I presume."

Chapter 10

"That's what happens when you're fucking the cavalry. They come riding in, guns a'blazing. Anything to make sure that precious Hannibal didn't suffer. In the end it didn't matter if he fucked you physically, or mentally, or both– everyone ended up in pieces on the kitchen floor."

Will's voice was syrupy with loathing; a bitter brew that tasted like sour, acidic bile at the back of his throat. His fingers, roughened with work, but long and skinny– all bony knuckles and deceptive eloquence– curled against the cold lead sash of the window, numb to the chill that seeped up through the metal.

"Of course they killed him. Not that he was innocent; he had blood on his hands. I'm sure that came as a comfort later. They got to tell themselves that they were playing the white knights, riding in to save the day." He scoffed a laugh, a tremor tensing through his shoulders, and running roughshod down the vertebrae in his spine.

It hurt to talk. But it was like breaking open a blister; the healthy pain masqueraded as relief.

"Spited love…" Will's breath puffed in a fog against the icy glass, punctuating a short, harsh laugh that smacked of self deprecation. "I could have forgiven him almost anything. But he murdered both my children, and how the *Hell* does he think I could ever forget that?'

"He's still out there. Living and enjoying, and creating *fucking human goddamn topiary*... And what?"

Will closed his eyes, glasses sliding low on his nose, "He bled every drop he could out of me. I don't know what else he thinks I've got to give. And yet, here I am. Here *we* are."

___

"It comes in a tidal wave; like a fucking slap in your face as a wake-up call. He's a fucking hypocrite - his most upfront argument would be he tried to protect you by doing so. Shoving your back behind the bars and watching you adapt a new outlook on life."

Should he mutter strings of prayers, to be planted upon the earth, breathing with bitterness coated along every alveolus with heavy layer of caked ash? All the burnt remnants of their past recollections, exchanged words - more like caustic remarks intended to turn rows and rows of jagged teeth and coping mechanisms.

Of course he killed, more impulsively and often than his doppleganger, but nevertheless, partaken and be entertained by the savagery and suffering of the others. The last thing he wanted to do is to create a temporary mise en scene to elevate them in an unnecessary shed of sweat and blood.

"The concept of innocence is overrated; who doesn't ever have their own tainted one way or another? As much as I am utterly abhorred by the evisceration - he longs for you, perhaps he

finally have fucking found one who can match the capacity of a virtuoso."

One way or another, every man is not for himself as the transparent, yet tight-knit, strung tight yet never breaking entrapment of an infinity symbol, marring over and over, without him ever making an attempt to break open. Perhaps he had been already conditioned to do so, since he had shared the womb and same strands of genome, the empathy was still at its full function, with his disconcertion.

Talking about his blood and flesh hurt like fucking hell, the somatic manifestation turned on with an irreparable onset of migraine - scalding tears will break through the silence and formulated with even more clarity than his own words. It's like playing a Russian roulette; toying with diminishing probability, by revealing the most private and intimate parts, contained in Pandora's box for safekeeping.

"So those blasphemous hoof prints remains to be desperate enough to override the virus that penetrates the very air they breathe. With all the genuineness, there are discrepancies. Morals become aesthetics. However you see fit - it will be his artist statement."

"Becoming, evolving like him, to see the beauty in killing."

Chapter 11

Will wasn't sure if Nigel and Hannibal had been in touch– it was possible, family was a bond that even the doctor wouldn't discard– or if Nigel's brain was simply as tightly woven into Hannibal's psyche as his own was.

"He never expected my fancy new outlook on life to include taking him *out of it.* Must have come as a nasty shock. Would have been nice to be a fly on the wall, there."

Labyrinths of rooms, overlapping and colliding in unexpected ways. With a sardonic quirk to his mouth, Will wondered if he would be seeing Nigel walking through the corridors of his own mind. If a stop to collect a phone number, a recipe, a map, would be coloured with the acrid tang of his cigarette smoke.

Sometimes he could smell the cultured notes of Hannibal's cologne. Like cedar and cold; a crisp scent that always, these days, seemed to hold a hint of copper.

Just like it had been when the man had reached out to him. A split second of warmth before the knife had twisted into his belly.

Hannibal had used their daughter as a lure, just like Hobbs. *Bastard* .

"He has fun playing God, you know. Maybe that's why we're still here. Talking about him. Because you can hate God, and you can love him; but you sure can't ever *forget* him."

Turning away from the window, Will looked up at Nigel over the top of his glasses; eyes the colour of glacier ice, but ever so slightly warmer, tracing the lines of his face.

"I could always see the beauty in it. That's part of the problem. There was a yawning chasm in my skull that he enjoyed exploiting. We're both fucked, when it comes to him.. At least you have the excuse of starting with a handicap."

There was a pause, thoughtful, as he turned his next words over in his mind. "He told me about your sister. But not you."

—

Hannibal to him, had been like drowning in a bitter coffee; if percolated too long and much, the filtration would let through all the gritty grounds and would stick to every follicle in his body. More than being the flesh and blood, he breathes him, could think like him if he greased the wheels enough to be facilitated. Outside of thirty thousand shared genomes, there would be only few differences that characterize their starkly different demeanor - he explodes, Hannibal implodes and lets himself transfuse, instilling his anger to let it manifest into something entirely else.

"If he could ever predict the coordinates and ensnare that particular fly into his mind palace. I'd give you much more of a credit than being a swatted fly - more as an imago, whispering

through the chrysalis, egging on your transformation. You must be aware, I was once before I freed myself from his unrelenting grasp."

Through the shared inclinations of iron and copper, oaky musk of his own cologne and trained palate through extensive years of tasting diverse culinary masterpieces, he had lost his own scents and flair; all crisp, plastered caress of silk and wool, meticulous and unforgiving down to quarter of an hour. Not fretting, per say, but ingrained down to every inch of his bone. The suffocation, almost heartless, had eventually drove him away as he had been set in stone to go off deep end.

"How ironic, he doesn't believe in god, but acts like god, vaunts about it like he would of his achievements. The sheer slap in my fucking face would be the fact that what he does is irrefutable. Hard to penetrate and reveal its rawness."

As much as love and hate coexists, the concept would always hurl back towards him in a ricocheting bullet - the very one perched snugly around his neck on the chains, with the ghastly reminder of the projected path etched upon the tight folds of the casing.

"Being Hannibal's own flesh and blood has its limits - you never outshine him in anything. He does it better than anyone else, lest his own fucking twin."

Tipping his chin in an attempt to take a smaller sip than he usually would, he pulls himself off from the comforting gravity of the couch to retrieve a few ibuprofen pills. Hoping this would do the foolproof trick of subsiding the erratic palpitation. The mulled words breaking the dam to let the 'yawning chasm' to become an unfathomable column of scalding air pushing through the apparition of the etched scar, he mutters in inglorious retreat.

"Bluntly put, Mischa is what matters, not me."

Chapter 12

“We all want to be God. He’s just more honest about it. If God can drop churches on his followers, then how much fault can he truly find in your brother’s designs? It doesn’t matter why we kill… We both know the feeling of power that comes with it.”

Nigel had never said, not really, that he had taken a life. But Will could feel his rage and resignation, and there was no doubt in his mind that the other man knew how it felt. The look of terror on your victim’s face, and the slow ebb of their heart as it ticked down to zero.

Will was almost never wrong.

With Hannibal he had been blind, yes; so blind. But his profile had been right.

The corner of his mouth jumped as he watched Nigel down a handful of painkillers, his throat working against the tablets to get them down. He knew that reflexive gesture, all muscle memory and the bitter resignation that there were no pills in the world that could help him. Wryly, he hoped that Nigel had more luck.

“She matters because he can make her perfect.”

Balancing his glass in one hand, Will sank down onto the couch, taking the space beside where Nigel had sat. The old, worn springs creaked in protest under his slight weight; and when Will leaned his head back, his eyes dropped closed. The window was an after image behind his eyelids, bruise-dark circles betraying long nights of short sleep.

“She won’t disappoint him, or hurt him. He hordes memories of her, but he can’t face them.. You’re different. You can make him angry, and question him. He can reach out to you, if he wants…”

The dim light caught a sliver of pale blue under his lashes, as Will watched Nigel from the corner of his eye.

“We know who he is, and what he does. And he can’t predict us. Oh– he can guess. And probably be right. But there’s no certainty there, and a control freak like Hannibal will agonize over that detail.’

“Our existence probably gives him a headache these days.”

—

The pearly speck of his hazel focuses into a laser-like sharpshooter’s gaze as the last hint of blaze turns to be absorbed into the inner crevices of his skull. The adamant surge of amber, ablaze with acerbic implacability passes through his throat with a sensation akin to a retracted set of talons, the hands of the squid scratching and perforating through the predator’s stomach.

He would be lucky if he doesn't turn himself inside out by disgorging himself later with his head lodged inside the toilet seat.

"It's like a fucking daybreak. That strip of silver lining signalling another day, not giving a meaning of finality. It's Mobius strip at its best. We are all enslaved by sprouting thump of those valves. Holding that fleeting switch and flicking it with ascendancy."

The rekindled lighting of his eyeballs intensify as the weight of the lump, not so surreptitiously makes past the taut cords down his system. The magnitude of all intensified with oozing stream of sweat, tracing his profile. It's both corroding and yearning - both a catalyst of inner destruction, within his enclosed vessel of nostalgia, his homecoming. Perhaps it was his freight of absence. The supposedly shed tears and bloods in retribution.

Along his brother 'losing his shit,' he would be stripping off all the meticulously constructed veil. Of course, Will had surely taken a considerable part in stripping him down to his more predatory, tucking into his private slaughter both within those vast walls of his mind palace, some places only reserved for him. Each of them had already taken an inaccessible room full of astringency - both in pungent bitterness and sharply incisive wits.

"She would have been his Galatea, Hannibal would have meticulously breathed the life upon her with his sinister fingertips, feeding her the delicate morsel of the wrongful atrocities assailants had committed."

With a jaundiced viewpoint, his assimilation adds more non-deference as he always had been black sheep of the family - preferring physical efficacious over scholastic attainments.

"He would want to make me into Prometheus. Once the most greatest benefactor and comrade turned plunderer, depriving one's most treasured memories which had been projected towards you - I would be the one to commit treachery by having you by my side."

Joining beside Will as their thighs barely brush upon the graze of the fabrics, stiffened as the topic of conversation. Each had their battle scars with the most spectacularly constructed designs.

"A malignant cell he can't get rid of - it will metastasize onto the very organ he doesn't fucking dare to prod at."

Chapter 13

Will kept the world at arm's reach. People were uncomfortable, they looked too much and saw too little. With their grasping greediness, they plucked rough fingers on the heartstrings of his empathy, just to see what would happen. Hannibal had dissected him for merit, to see what made him tick; and Will was left with the uncanny impression that his own reflection was disappointed with him, now.

"Prometheus stole the fire from the Gods, and gave it to mankind. Stopped them from freezing to death. What's treachery to one person, is salvation to another. And just because Hannibal wouldn't like this? Too bad. It's about time people did things he didn't approve of."

He could feel the dip of the couch as Nigel joined him, his solid weight dragging down the cushions. The tension between them trebling with proximity, and making Will's chest feel tight and airless; like the weight of their words had settled squarely over his heart.

Nigel wasn't like most people. His emotions were like feeling the sun; and all the rest of the world paled in comparison. Anger and black humour, frustration and grief, it was all defined and overwhelming and beautiful; for the first time in months, Will felt *present.* Reality anchoring itself in the moment.

He didn't pull away.

"I didn't see how many walls he had put up between me, and the rest of the world." Will said quietly, his curly head tilted back against the couch, tracing the water stains on the ceiling with his eyes.

"And when I tried to get back to reality, I realized that I didn't know the way anymore. So I held on to the only things I knew for certain.. Even when they started slipping away. Maybe I should be grateful that he stuck a knife in me. It made things real, very fast."

With a rueful chuckle, Will turned his head against the back of the couch, looking up at the other man. *With you by my side* . The words plucked at the phantom fishhooks he could feel embedded in his flesh, like each syllable was connected to the strange ties between them.

"Is it treachery to be here? I think.. It feels like a lot of things. But treacherous isn't one of them."

___

The idea of rejection had been effortless to Nigel. Already having familiarized himself with scrambling people, the *sea of faces* , all the hustle and bustle without letting streams of people merely become acquaintances. Those stamp prints he would just etch enough to be imperceptible at best. Like willow charcoal's dust rubbing off with each swipe of his hand. The natural oil from his fingertips would leave furious slashes of blades. Those who left lasting impressions be only handful; even then, the predictable course of action instantly

made bubbling crystallized mist to clear up and settle in the frozen spine, each vertebrae creaking with whoop of rage.

“Like heart breaking and simultaneously repairing. As much a debilitating slash is nonfatal, it will heal. *Treachery* and *salvation* go hand to hand and we’re born to it. When Hannibal consumes my mind, it’s like an empty chariot and stallions’ hooves rampantly beating inside my skull.”

As it is now. Not even looking behind the shoulders when he had taken a treacherous step outside the mansion surely had struck a gigantic marring scar in his twin’s seemingly nonexistent heart. With each word dripping with venom, it manifests into *hara-kiri;* necessitating an irreparable damage to himself as well with each motes of dust in the air become hornet’s stings. With or without those, he would still feel that beastly madness of those bites, leaving him in a silent heap.

The primacy of the affliction becomes the different side of the same coin. No matter how much he tries to liberate himself from the gossamer of inescapable cobwebs, the provenance becomes clear. Like the sun and moon, this would be the last propinquity of them coexisting in the same space.

“Less walls for me to begin with, I had that advantage like you had mentioned before. That didn’t mean I would be Promethean in completely crumbling down those walls and see him through the nakedness.

Perhaps it was karma he had been eviscerated and soon after, faced a surefire injury that most people would have had a hard time coping with - besides going through a rake’s progress, he knew Hannibal would have shown him both pity and gloating smirk as he rubbed in salt along gnarled flesh and its protrusion. As if he had been the master composer.

“Maybe. Being treacherous is the last thing I feel right now. Besides rapier tooth and claw migraine, it would be a red-letter day to remember.”

Like the blazing colors sweeping across the cerulean ocean, their gazes meet with sympathetic gratification. More potent and effective than ibuprofen, their rather calm retrospection becomes unperturbed as their invisible link strengthens. Yet, the inescapable thought lingers like a curl of smoke drifting out the top of the chimney, his gaze hovers around where the knife would had left a slash of a smile.

Chapter 14

They had come around full circle, and yet, ended up somewhere entirely different from where they had started. Will could still feel the hooks in his ribs, the barbed points gripping at his hip bones, and pulling under his skin; they were lodged in vital parts of him..

But they didn't hurt. Not anymore.

He couldn't explain it, and didn't know what it was; this feeling that was *akin* to empathy, and still a world away. He couldn't dissect it, or see i– this tangible thread that seemed to bind them together– but then, he didn't want to, either.

The couch dipped as Nigel joined him, and Will let his eyes drift wholly closed. Even the raw wounds that Hannibal had scored into his mind didn't seem to hurt so much here. In the dark, there was only the two of them, and and the world seemed an eternity away.

Of all the strange, dead-end leads he could have followed… That he had managed to catch a last seat, on a midnight flight to Bucharest… Of all the bars, in all the bustling city he could have chosen…

An impossible sequence of events that had lead him here. In this moment. And what point did it stop being *just dumb luck?*

" A red letter day…" He murmured with a smile, "Maybe that's exactly what it is."

Will didn't look into people's eyes; it was a general rule. Eyes were too intimate, too uncomfortable. They betrayed too much of what people were thinking, facets that Will didn't want to see, didn't want to know.

But when he looked up at Nigel, there was… Understanding there. Empathy, not pity. They had both faced the nature of the beast, and lived to tell the tale.

"I never asked what you were doing in the bar tonight.. Or what you told your friends when you came after me…. We just sort of left."

—

The ricocheting echo inside his inner skull is the only persistence that sings a requiem to his lamentation. To their loss of touch, between the flesh and blood, the seemingly indestructible bond finally broken as once soldered metal corrodes to break. It turns into suspended dusts through the trajectory of bullet that once grazed to wipe his existence on this very earth.

He still feels his wrists had been restrained, through the unforgiving scrapes of razor-sharp blades, with each minute movement, the vital fluid caresses his every pore and radiates heat, along with the red-tinged glow of his sun-kissed skin.

The embodiment of inescapable doom as his head jerks back, the draining fluid both makes him leap with renewed life, the second chapter freshly written with a sharpened beveled edge of the quill after tearing himself down from the silent confession.

Plunging deep into his marvelous imagination as he kneels over Hannibal, pinning his arm like a sharp precision of a needle perforating through the thick protruding veins. Like the coursing drug in his system taking over every ounce of his relinquished control, his talon-like grip, slender and dexterous fingers squeezes the life out of him.

Growing feverish as the cords etch through the twin's hardened skin, his finely sculpted face lax as if he had been the subject of suffocation. Brows coming together in a tight pinch, he lets everything go. Their ebbing heart, exchanged memories, shared breathes, the longing and yearning, all it is left is a blear haziness blending the unfathomable sea and its distinctive horizon.

Goodbye, Hannibal.

Each drainage has every inch of his vein whiten and taut with curled fingers and knuckles. Quivering pink cupid's bow of his lips brim with proverbial emotion. There would be no more contemplation as he becomes no more of the disguised pray with a mask of a predator, plucking himself from the gaze of the abyss.

Regaining composure as his deeply etched face quickly maintains his usual mask, almost blank, his gorgeous eyes the color of clouded skies, blazing with orange glow. The purposeful act of distillation.

"I had permitted him to reach within the deepest part of me, inaccessible even to me. He had been the harbinger to all things askew. Like an uncoiled viper only sizing up its prey. His manipulation has been silky as ever, always three steps ahead of my projection."

Venomous words perches close to his tongue, waiting. Now seems like the perfect time to let it flow like a unending cycle of love and hate. Finally sealing a closure on a open-case file. "Now I am going to give him his own medicine. Hannibal Lecter is purged from my mind, at least the crucial make-up of his design is gone, without a trace."

A flutter akin to a flap of an injured bird expands his ribcage before he continues, "I was merely trying to rip those fucking pages myself, the spine of the well-constructed book is obstinately durable when it comes to bond such as ours. I haven't told them anything. Like a moth trailing after a incandescent flame, it's incorrigible to avoid such path befalling a person."

Chapter 15

Nigel spoke in tainted poetry, his voice in the velvet darkness seeming more real to Will that the shifting lights of the city below. On the fifth floor, the world outside began to echo, trickling up to them with the hum of humanity. In the small, black hours before dawn, the Bucharesti streets flowed with brandy and beer, and reveled in its' own corruption.

But for a short while, he and Nigel had followed the strung cord between them, and left the world. It was outside, beyond the walls, and in their darkness they didn't buy the rules of the world. Or its' complications.

"He's your brother, but he doesn't have to be your jailer. That's your choice now. You can choose to evict his designs from your brain"

Will hummed, finally twisting subtly in his seat; one knee drawn over the other, and his fingers jabbed roughly through his unruly curls, as he propped up his head to watch the emotions shift and slide through Nigel's expression.

His free hand rested on his stomach, the pad of his thumb tracing back and forth across the raised ridge of scar tissue. Beneath his light, buttoned down shirt, he couldn't see the massive, smiling wound that Hannibal had carved into him; but the feeling was always there.

He'd be lying if he said that he didn't think about it. Of sliding the edge of his knife under the raw edge, excising the snail-trail of his work, and reclaiming that piece of himself. Cutting out Hannibal from his skin in a way that he had never been sure he could do with his mind.

Only… perhaps he could. It didn't seem so impossible anymore.

"So we both walked out into the night with a virtual stranger? That was very smart of us… Then again, you held a gun to my back. What were you expecting?"

Looking up at Nigel, the corner of Will's mouth slanted up in a worn, exhausted smile. Exhaustion and the slow, cathartic burn of exorcising some of their demons, turning the expression into a surprisingly calm one.

Not the brittle, rigid calm he usually sported. But, almost peaceful. Almost.

"I think I'm glad you followed me."

—

Only scattered expanse of stardust and whispering winds grazing the comforting scent of the calfskin flapping across his side, he would drown himself in an absence of light when the burden weighed in stacks. He knew the extreme danger he risked himself by turning off the safety precautions of high and low beams along with discarded helmets and any other

protective gears. The night had been a whole another universe - a different time away, a paradigm shift.

He might as well as be on the roads, the lingering heat absorbed upon the asphalt, along with the screech and rotation of the fat wheels create enough friction to emit melding heat that plasters his tapered trousers against the exhaust pipe.

How he relished the span of time when he would scent the petrichor rising from the asphalt, the first drop grazing across his high nose, curving down sharp cheekbones as it makes a sharp turn, raindrops turning tiny whips, urging him to come to his senses as orange blaze across the dipping horizon akin to a wildfire.

“He stopped being my sibling long ago, but the nature of the relationship. Beside the same slanting curve of the light and shadows contouring the planes and protrusions, there’s not a fucking remote likeness that gravitate each other closer.”

With more spillage of admissions and streams of raw emotion perched to let out, the stubborn migraine seems to retreat its force. Perhaps it had been his own scythe-like animosity eating at him from inside out. Now that it abates as the stream of his consciousness regains tranquil pin-quiet, then he is able to sink into the solemn sanctuary of his simpler, densely packed mind palace - woods packed with chirped joy and scamper of a child, still innocent and without the spillage of blood and pus.

He could literally scent the oozing flowing river of heat dissipating from the clamminess of his hardened skin, the ring of moisture, glistening to reflect the contouring radiance of the moonlight accentuates the slightest dent, where his fingers had idly drawing a circle. As circumstances had his motion set in stone. It both offered a relief as the pit in his stomach becomes a gaping hole.

The notion becomes a substitution as the pieces of recollections continue to pile up in a continuous strokes of impasto. Then again, sometimes the masterpiece would benefit from scraping the excess, the redundancies and intricacies. Hannibal would peel the layer upon layer, he would put up a considerable fight until he ripped what seemed a soldered link.

“That’s my usual method of greeting a stranger. Consider it an extension of the self. If I had foreseen the emotional disgorging, I would have welcomed you in an open arm. Don’t take any fucking offense. If I would offer a consolation - the revolver was unloaded.”

The last discharge, as enervation settles in, then he wears his most brightest slash of a smirk of the day, almost imperceptible yet strikingly dramatic.

“Perhaps it was gravity. There are things better left untouched, like motes of dust in the air we breath in. As long as they don’t fucking clog up my windpipe, I would better hold my position as a oblivious ignorant.”

“And you’re in my flat, a stranger’s house where you could detect the faintest of emotion seeping through the pores of cement. I’m sure the catharsis had been on both side of the traffic. It would be a shame if it hadn’t.”

Chapter 16

They both had their demons. Some were real, their passing presence carved in the scars that both men wore. Leaving snail trails in silvered flesh, like a message that endured on, long after they had gone. *We were here. These were our property.*

And some were imaginary. They were the half-heard voices when they tried to sleep, and the threat in the shadows that was just out of sight. Imaginary horrors wouldn't be escaped, they were the ones that followed you around the world.

But eventually you learned to cope with the monster under the bed. You had to put your feet on the floor eventually, and start moving.

"It's fine.. You're not the first person to pull a gun on me. And they weren't nice enough to spare the bullets."

Absently Will passed a hand over his arm, knowing by touch where the gnarled gunshot wound was. Scarred over thickly, as though the surgeon hadn't quite known how to sew him together. Story of his life, really.

"It's both of us." He confirmed, tracing the 'polite' half inch of space between them. The strange bond feeling looser, as though it had served its' purpose for the moment. Or maybe, like a string with the tension released, it simply coiled between them, waiting for the moment they tried to move.

"This place feels like you. Like your emotions are spread on every surface. I don't have to feel the rest of the world when you're here." Slowly, his own mouth curved up; mirroring Nigel's dry smirk, but without the rough edges that the man wore so beautifully.

"You're loud enough to drown out Bucharest."

—

Unconsciously, the caustic cynicalness of slash vanishes along with the last twirl of heat, waltzing into the cool air of the ambiance along with the fluctuating heartbeat. After all the obstinate fire extinguishes underneath the core of his existence, the unforeseen marrows of his bones would still hold onto that aglow of heat.

Cigarette butts were known to cause a calamity; with its projected path unknown, all he has to do was to let it go rampant - he doesn't even have to flick the composing stick and bring out each instrument to sweep through the expanse of his skin and pensive.

Surrounded in a bit of a haze, his fully submerged figure looking above the rippling curlicue of the iridescent surface, the crudely healed slash, with sunken planes and sealed entry where the body had frenetically soldered itself up is the first to register the licking tremor that radiate through his torso. Unbeknownst him as the pendulous sun and moon coexisted upon

the subject of his disconcerted integrity, his stomach contracts, as if taking all the minute sensation and containing inside the hard carapace of his shell.

“I don’t need a fucking gun to disarm nor exert force. I’ve hardened and debilitated through endless sparring of brawls and predicaments. Firearm helps me to hide my true self, it’s removed and almost clinical. Bare hands are intimate. I don’t get fucking intimate with lots.”

Becoming that of a soldier who had ran a considerable amount to pass the news of a victorious account, it wouldn’t surprise him an ounce if he ever dropped dead on the very spot where the weight of the fanciful musing turned a temporary closure on the chapter he sought to be finally drafted.

The damp coat he wears grounds him and offers him a strange sense of relief as he pulls off from the molasses-like cushions, the shirt discarded as if he had been peeling off an ecdysis.

“I seem to have that outwardly effect on everyone I meet. With the right individual, I suppose, the safely entrenched strings have tendency to be creepy-crawly over the undeniable facts. As long as I have the skipping stones to step over.”

With the deeply-rooted lightning of the mark, lining through the protrusion of each ribcage, he fetches two light sweaters and a blanket from the dresser, barren and strictly utilitarian just like all the other things occupying the space.

“I have no fucking intention of letting it drown tonight. It is rather late and the last thing I want to do is have less of your company, so I was going to offer you the couch.”

Chapter 17

They were both damp from the drizzling slush outside, the soggy flakes of almost-snow long since melted in Will's curls, and leaving a clammy chill behind. For the first time in what seemed like forever, Will realized just how cold he was; like someone waking from a terrible dream, only to realize that all their limbs are still attached.

And functioning. Sluggishly, and stiffly, but still under his command.

A draft seeped through the window frame, leeching into the air, and making the ancient central heating rattle with the effort of keeping the room warm enough to live in. It didn't quite manage, but Will had some respect for the fact that he couldn't see his breath indoors.

Stretching, his muscles tensing briefly before burning with the slow heat of expansion, his arms drawn over his head, Will finally shrugged off his damp coat, tossing it unceremoniously over the arm of the couch. "You don't have t….oo."

Will started to say, his words trailing off into the stillness as he looked up.

In the dim light, he could see the gnarled scar that slanted down Nigel's side; a wicked, mortal wound that stood out starkly against otherwise flat, lean muscles. Slowly he tilted his head to the side, fingers drumming a single beat against his own knee.

Usually he would look away.

Usually he would decline the offer.

"If you think you can handle my face in the light of day, I'll happily take your couch. I don't think my chances of navigating back to my hotel at this time of night are very good. Not without getting myself mugged, or shot, and left in a alley somewhere."

Tonight was not *'usually'* for either of them.

Will's shoes clattered slightly as he kicked them off; and his fingers felt numb as he tugged at the button at the hollow of his throat. One, and then two, his pulse trembling beneath the skin as he dragged the old cotton over his head. Worn sleeves and frayed hems, catching his glasses and knocking them askew on his nose.

Beneath the material he was thin. Too thin. With countable ribs and pale skin, dusted with sandy coloured, almost invisible freckles in the dim light that escaped in through the window.

"Toss me the blanket?" He asked, draping his damp shirt out a bit more carefully, so it would dry before morning, "Everything here is clammy from the rain."

And, bisecting his stomach, the hideous slash of raw pink scar tissue. His own reminder that a predator had gotten his claws into him, and he'd survived.

___

Like a stiff marsupial stretching after a long, sated hibernation, his appendages stretch as the suppressed heat recoils back within the expanse of his back, each vertebrae creaking and popping as the bleariness clears. Like the aperture of the camera refocusing along with the new influx flood of light, the purge clarifies his perception.

The drowned world itself resurfacing in a form of a long, exhaustive exhale.

And the bleakness that had dripped over the flat lifts as if the curse had been countered with the music coursing through the eardrum in a faint hum. As an enchantment that would never fail.

With both from the elements and perspiration stealing the warmth in gradual increments, he subdues the faint track of goosebumps lining the flat planes of his torso. The cupping moisture sweeps across the red-tinged cheekbones as the jagged formation of icicles melt within the confines of where spawned demons had been.

With them causing a uncontrollable and unpredictable stampede upon the expanse of his inner skull or letting them subdued behind the gnarled, barbed wire of his subconscious, their existence and its codependency, like substances and alcohol, had a tendency to make his adamant nature malleable.

From the experience of being in a cacophonous streams of needless sounds, he had adopted to the environment of the club as a learned stimuli, drowning out the senses if necessary. This seem to be the incorrigible exemplary moment as their gaze meet in mid-air.

I want you to.

The silence, along with the wounds that made him to overcome the sufferer in him inside, remains to be golden as the drug he is still addicted to - it is golden, it satiates the cravings he would have when things became too overwhelming. Without being judgmental, it let him be.

Then again, he didn't have a reason to look away. He could sense Hannibal's presence, his affliction and heartache through the invisible motion of the cold metal. Just like an extension of the self - it had been as intimate as he could get with an individual.

"I believe the restoration of the mind should come from the very place you purged yourself in. I sure had emerged triumphant through the non-clarity and complicity of the... relationship. You have to inject a bit of venom inside you to build tolerance, so you can concoct an antidote."

His usual demeanor swiftly returning with a lopsided curl of amusement, his long stride catches up with Will's somewhat sluggish motion of tugging off the shirt and catches the glasses with a tight pinch of his fingers.

"Wouldn't fucking want to break those, hm? And precisely the reason why I brought you the sweater. It's an old one of mine I need to throw away, it doesn't fit me anymore."

Rather gravitated towards the empath as the blanket unfolds it in itself, the curious fingertip finds the way to trace the pink threads that mar the other's pale skin, serving as tenacious cling to their precious lives.

"Romanian winters get utterly depressing and gloomy. Hopefully it'll clear up when we greet the world once again in reluctance."

Chapter 18

You could spend years learning to become immune. In tiny doses, walking the fine line between your tolerance, and the risky drop on the other side.

Sometimes you recovered. Your body gathering the strength to endure the pain. And sometimes the poison changed you. From inside your veins, it acted outwards, even as it tried to destroy you. Reshaping cells and creating something new in their wake. What that transformation would be? Even the poison couldn't guess.

And Will wasn't sure if they had been *lucky* , or simply stronger than Hannibal's venom.. And he didn't want to find out. He had bled out as much as he could; and his heart felt… Stronger, for it.

"I never thought about it that way… But you're absolutely right." Will's smile was hidden for a moment behind the old, grey fabric,; distracted by the thoughts of poison and immunity. And when he looked up again, the world had shifted.

"Wha-? Oh! My glasses…. I'd forgotten them were in my pocket. Thank you.. I don't want to try navigating the city blind."

In the dark there was Nigel's rough fingers gripping the black acetate frames; and Will felt his chest constrict at the sight. People didn't touch his glasses, it was too personal; too close to the man they kept at arms reach. For their own safety.

Taking the glasses, Will set them on the coffee table, exhaling a slow breath he hadn't realized he was holding. They had become his shield, diverting glances that might have grown too curious. But it was late, and his eyes already blurry with exhaustion; here, at least, he didn't need that shield.

Without his glasses, Will's eyes looked terribly blue; watching Nigel as the other man drew closer. His chest rose; ribs shifting visibly beneath his skin as he inhaled; a smooth motion in, and a hitching, shuddering one as he breathed out, his muscles tensing hard under the unexpectedly intimate caress.

People didn't *see* his scar, much less *touch it* . Goosebumps that had nothing to do with the cold rashed out across his skin, and Will's mouth jumped with an uncertain smile.

"The nice thing about even the nasty winters is that they don't last forever. Sometimes you just have to push through and endure it."

—

Even with the built-up tolerance, there was a certain predicament - what if he's a drop too much from causing an irreparable damage? That wicked strand that would cause the haywire upon the very system he had meticulously balanced by the thread would be a catalyst to making his foundation shake and collapse as he had been battered with artillery fire without

any warning. He would be unguarded, as the fragile bones broke, the spillage of blood expelling as the body's mechanism disintegrated.

Hannibal had simply been iniquitous that way - he knew just enough to be pendulous between pushing it too much and standing behind the clinical wall of apathetic behavior. As the venom buds inside him, then he'd retract, administering and introducing enough combatants in the form of reinforcements.

Most people weren't fortuitous - simply because he had endured the successions of violence, the generosity of enough livid bruises and contusion along with blessed genes of high tolerance for pain along with bones of steel rod didn't matter when the Grim Reaper set his unwayward work. Just enough bloodshed beyond his reprimand towards it, or the unpredictable trajectory ripping through the sensitive bundles of nerves and tissues.

"If Death had a morsel of sympathy, then the end of the line for me is a reproach. However bitter the concept is for both of us, the triumvirate fighting upon that decisive whip would be effectively hindered as long as I cling onto my life."

A faint peek over that veil of curtains as the silver lining graces in the form of unhindered teal blue - they were indeed mesmerizing; like he can't walk past the ponds and marshes that seemed to reflect all the raw soul, the dominant distinguishable boulders and fragmented weaknesses that made up his whole. It was painfully ope, as a gaping wound, too stubborn to be coagulated.

"I would've suggested you to get fucking contacts," *if I hadn't known that could be an added protection from strangers looking through the windows of the soul.* His own told too much different accounts. Sometimes it would reflect Hannibal's maroon tilt without that immaculate control; in most circumstances, they would be just him. The soulful fiery manifestation that could both deceive and spill his guts open.

"I'm sure we have fucking endured and took enough of a lengthy excursion in the midst of the brutal elements," contrary to the obscured slideshow that concludes the night full of spillage, his rough fingertips are occupied with clothing Will in his old sweater - full of flayed threads, stained recollections still visible through each fiber as their skin healed in itself.

"I suppose our mind doesn't have any breath to exhale out the grim encounters and events that shape the mind beneath or beyond it after our conversation." It would have been as good as a lullaby, as he gives the garment the last unrefined tug.

Chapter 19

It had been the chance meeting, on a regular evening the midweek. It could have been any bar in the city, any street in the world. And yet, in the space of a few hours, a strange alchemy had occurred. No lead had been turned to gold; but as the last vestiges of cathartic pain ebbed, Will couldn't help but feel like some of his old, leaden heart had been given a new shine.

"I hope you do cling to your life. I think the world is going to be much more interesting with you in it."

The smile that crossed his face came easier than the ones before; as though his muscles had finally remembered the shape that they once familiarly held. Holding out an arm, Will clumsily allowed Nigel to drag the worn material over his head, his curls crackling with static as they stuck out at wild angles.

Hannibal had always been bespoke silk and perfect tailoring. Proprietary. His world built around him to such exacting standards… Turning up his nose at Will's frayed hems and comfortable, worn cotton. Implying with each quiet scoff, that such simple things were somehow…

Shallow. Too simple.

Seeing Nigel looking down at him; sharp featured and all fire in the dim light; Will gathered the too-long sleeves over his hands, pressing the folds of threadbare wool to his face. Faded cigarette smoke and aftershave. Not *too* simple, just.. Comfortable.

"Thank you." He said after a pause, his chilled fingers lighting on Nigel's wrist, feeling the hard ridges of the bones beneath the skin, "This has been one of the strangest nights of my life. And I have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow.. But I'm strangely alright with knowing you're going to be right on the other side of the wall."

___

The entangled strands of memories had been overly agglomerated and had lost its integrity and poignancy long time ago - instead of transpiring into a blanket cocooning him, away from the afflictions and bitter resentment that had continued to haunt his subconscious, they turn into coarse gritty prick of sand and leaves ugly, septic claw marks. There would be no emollient for that sort of thing - it's unforeseen and unpredictable.

Perhaps until now, the closest thing an abeyance could come to, albeit temporarily. It could have been a chance encounter or a predestined crossing of their paths, *this* , however this particular experience would influence him in the imminent future, it had offered him a strange connection.

In any day of the week, he would take this relegation over his desperate death grip of electric explosions of vigorous energy and bustling steps of the club, which continues to remain in his

absent-mindedness inside his memory, his own abandoned haunted house. The very house built on memories as the club's basement reduces down to that very essence of the concept.

"I don't fucking intend to perish, not just yet when there are so much things to draw back on this particular exercise of catch-22 and kindred connection."

He wasn't a prisoner to draw upon the memories etched upon every lingering scent and fiber of the threadbare sweater, but the only thing he had remembered was that the garment had been one of the first things he had ever purchased when he had been a relative newcomer to the city.

The familiarity of the occurrence transforms itself in a rare sentimentalism. The act itself solidifying as a passing on. *A rite of passage* .

The illumination sharply curves as it takes a turn on his chiseled features and they turn into a gentle caress upon his hardened flesh, turning both tender and brutal as the daybreak spreads upon the distant horizon. With Will's touch, the unfamiliar tingle spreads over the ridges of his veinous hand, both stone cold and burning fuse at the same time.

"It has been a long while I let a stranger invade into my habitat like this. Perhaps it was a calling, or a fucking divine intervention, I'm unsure," he pauses with a slight tilt to his right. "Yes, it will be a quench of a relief."

With that, he smooths a stubborn curl sticking out of Will's head onto its proper place with what it seems to be the easy expanding grin.

Chapter 20

Measured out in sliding, unnoticed minutes, the sallow horizon beyond the stiff, black horizon of the city began to lighten and turn grey. It seeped in through the darkness, melting into the apartment through the greasy grime still caked on the fifth-floor window. A cold, gentle light that reminded the men that reality could not be forestalled forever.

“Usually I like to keep things impersonal. It works out better for me that way. Less connection..” Will trailed off for a moment, his skin tingling as Nigel’s worn fingers casually sweep his hair from his face from his face; dark coiled strands curling around the knobbly knuckle.

It didn’t feel like an intrusion, and Will’s smile widened slowly.

“I think I’m going to have to make an exception for you. I let you into my head, you let me into your house.. Looks like we both get to be exceptions. I’m not sure if there was always a Nigel-shaped door in my defenses, or if you’re just *that talented* , climbing over them so easily.”

People had tried,. People had failed. Nigel was different. In the softening light, his rakish smile was slanted and generous, transforming him from his brother’s mirror to something wholly unique. They shared the same features, but wore them so differently, Will thought, that he could tell them apart anywhere.

Taking half a step back, Will nodded towards the couch. Without his glasses, the bruise-dark circles under his eyes were even more pronounced, like someone had smudged darkness under them with a broad swipe of their thumb.

“We should probably get a little sleep… Sweet dreams, Nigel.”

—

How their mind had been like the sea; constantly changing back and forth from calm to ill. The ebbing foamy kiss of the waves retract from the crevasse of his inflamed brain, leaving only the evidence of their existence in porous remnants of the suppressed reality.

The daybreak almost seems ethereal - another warped reality away from the weighty blackness of the flat. The tainted company of his associates and their usual shady activities; more plummeting, constant visits of the one in his dreams. Taking on different forms and disguises to hang him on the noose.

Both infatuation and contempt involves killing a part of him, over and over again.

The overt or observable part of his character or personality would be the only gauge that would be offered by him. None deserved to know the covert and past behaviors of him that would dictate a multitude of possible outcomes and there had been an extremely rare presentation that took place.

And it makes him rather not vulnerable as it is supposed to be, like the stars' life cycle, giving back their material so that the new star could live. Yet, he would maintain his integrity as the most dominant one of all. Perhaps as one of the most brightest stars that held the capacity to shine its light along the adjacent nebula.

"For me, the opposite, I might have shit tons of meaningless connections, easy to cut off without having to shed any emotion over it. People just come and go, like good deeds. Traumas linger, those just fade like a good photograph would."

The suffocating warmth invades now with the medicine finally kicking in, the skin as dry as the earth suffering with a long drought blooms with effervescent red tinge.

"It feels more like I've passed through those walls like a phantom would. I feel like I've lived as one. To fucking wrapped up in my own head until something just gave away, but when the lightening strikes, you gotta clutch it, never fucking let that go."

Uncharacteristically and somewhat gawkily withdrawing both of his gaze and wearily eyes slowly blinking as the weight upon the whirl of perpetual perplexity peters out, he suppresses a light yawn and pivots in the opposite direction.

"Don't let those fucking bed bugs bite you."

Chapter 21

In the earliest light of dawn, still weak and grey, the springs of the couch creaked slightly under Will's weight. With the weight of their conversation given some release to his own demons (ever close, but let out on their leashes) he slowly began to realize just how tired he was. Weeks of poor sleep– perhaps even months– suddenly rolling over him like a flood.

Silence reigned in the apartment as both men slept, and for the first time in a very long time, Will wasn't troubled by nightmares. There were no branching antlers or cascades of blood; pulled down beneath the absurdities of dreams, there was only the desperately needed rest.

It was hours later when he finally woke, blinking slowly in bleary confusion as he tried to puzzle out where he was, and what had woken him. *Nigel's apartment. After last night.* He supplied for himself, fumbling for his glasses and sitting up. Rubbing the gritty sleep from the corners of his eyes, Will squinted over at the oven, a small neon glow reading 2:32.

His mouth felt cottony and stale, as he untangled himself from the blanket, navigating over to the small bathroom, and straightening himself up as well as he could. His curls were a hopeless mess, Nigel's old sweater sliding on his narrower shoulders; but behind his glasses, the dark circles were less obvious, some of the suffocating fog in his brain dissipated.

"What a strange night.." He hummed to himself, padding back to the living room.

___

It is strange enough to have the tracing of his body align along with the slight dip of the mattress from many nights before. Never the quality of a Tempur-Pedic, but nevertheless still the adequate enough to let him sink into the oblivion, he feels weirdly comforted by the fact that he wouldn't be surrounded by intrinsic staleness of the heavy smoke, condensed through and through within the unventilated office with a fatal dose of bundled up anger charged through each speck of dust floating around like ashes from the catastrophic wildfire.

Like the fate of charred carcass of the unfortunate creature having perished underneath webs of entangled closure, the curtain call approaches a lot sooner than he realizes. Having fallen a victim to constant failing of his self-destructive coping mechanisms and the ensuing sleeplessness that would sometimes accompany with fitful cat naps instead of being out like a light as usual, the vigilance in his unconscious keeps an eye open still. Always ready to alert him when the hooting train approaches despite his raddled look gazing him through the soul.

After a series of a rake's progress, a well-deserved serenity submerges him as he sinks into the pitch-black of the dreamless night. No more of an unwelcome recrudescence of feeling, all red in tooth and claw. The violent side of the natural world as the unsentimental devour happens from within him. He cannot judge if he's unwillingly assigned the unfamiliar role of being a prey or a brain hemorrhage (which was entirely possible with his condition) was finally taking him towards the netherworld.

His tightly shut eyes doesn't split open to greet the reality until the sun is high above his head, letting the intensity contour around his turned back and weirdly sticking out locks of hair that resemble a set of feeler than anything else. With entangled blanket and an appendage hanging off the side of the creaking twin-size steel framed bed, he flops on his stomach to bury his head down into the pillow before pulling himself off from the temptation of being a sloth.

Scratching his dimple along the spine with a jaw-splitting yawn, as if magnetized and pulled by unbreakable gravity, his usual swaggering gait attracts him to the kitchenette, dumping an ample amount of coffee grounds to make some. "What about the previous night?" He mutters, well aware of the other man making his way back even with his back turned.

Chapter 22

“Just trying to piece it all together. I’m not used to actually sleeping for long enough to get disoriented.” Will answered, rubbing his hand against the back of his neck, and trying to ease out the tension from sleeping on the worn, sagging couch.

There were places that a man in his mid-thirties felt jabbing springs more clearly than he had at eighteen, after all.

With a roll of his shoulders, Will felt some of the tight coiling ease, punctuated with an audible pop as he worked out a few more kinks, his spine protesting for a loud instant. “And if you’re making coffee, then you’re officially my new patron saint.” He added, a lopsided smile chasing away some of the lingering haze from his long sleep.

In the bright light of day, Nigel was interestingly transformed. His hair caught at strange, clumped angles; and the scored imprint of his pillow still red on his stubbly cheek. He looked softer, rumpled, and less like his brother (for which Will was eternally grateful). In little, gathering moments, Nigel was seeping into the corridors of his mind.

Tearing down the images of his twin’s face, and replacing them with his own.

Will didn’t mind the redecoration.

Still wearing Nigel’s old sweater, Will pushed his glasses up his nose– stealing a sidelong glance at his face, before turning away half a heartbeat later. “So, what were you doing today?” He asked after a minute, taking the pot from the coffee machine and filling it with water.

Anything to keep his hands busy.

—

The rubicund folds and ridges of skin still retains the faint pattern of geometric patterned print, somewhat like a tribal tattoo of the Native Indians. Except his hair manifests into a slothful male lion’s mane and his second stretch of his jaw lets out a crack upon his creaking bones and tense muscles. As if thunder guided every cell inside his body to be shrunken, although his muscle-packed limbs required more regeneration and circulation of those vigor.

“And I’m more fucking inclined to snap my eyes right open without the fucking alarm going off, it must be my penchant for wrapping my head around the ghastly haunting image that seem to seep into every fucking orifice.”

The hue and grainy rough texture of the grounds is mundane, yet striking enough for him to recall the tactility of his own skeleton pushing out against the epidermal, his very own complexion the ugly ash gray of death, and his deep-ridged eyes pushed even further back deep into their sockets.

Pulling a scratched, too frequently used pan out in attempt to fry few eggs and slabs of frozen bacon for breakfast along with the overhead sun and the air of both heat prostration and very condition of their existence.

“To a nocturnal owl, fucking bitter strong coffee is an absolute essential. I wouldn’t survive a fraction of a second without two cups making into my system in an hour.”

Pouring a copious amount of oil onto the pan and letting out a brutish hiss as few drops of scalding oil splattering all over the stove and some on his arm, he cracks open a few eggs and returns his full attention back to the coffee maker.

“Well, if I ever manage to make a fucking plate of scrambled eggs and shit mounds of bacon, I was going to get ready for saturnalia of daring deeds, beautiful women and cruel intentions, as defined as getting ready for another serried night of club,” wiping the spatula on the cleanest rag he could find, he adds, barely able to catch the slipping edge of the collar, too stretched and loose like some of the whores’ kitties.

“I was planning to take a leave of absence from work.”

Chapter 23

They were both a bit of a mess; but in a refreshing change (for both of them, Will suspected) it wasn't the mortal sort of mess that usually followed them. Not the sort that comes after a too-long night with poor sleep. When you wake up with blood under your fingernails, and the acrid, burned smell of gun powder at the back of your throat.

No, this was very different.

It was messy hair and morning breath, stiff muscles that just needed to be stretched out, and the surprisingly pleasant *what next?* atmosphere in the small kitchenette.

"I know that you mean… I'm a bit of a zombie before I've had a cup. You ok?" He added after a beat, as the grease in the pan splattered.

Will gave Nigel half his attention, watching him from the corner of his eye, as the older man clanged around, searching for a frying pan– obviously intent on making something to eat.

Belatedly, Will realized just how hollow his stomach actually felt; all twisted up over his guts. He wasn't sure when the last time he had eaten was, and for the millionth time, reminded himself that food was not, in fact, optional.

Pouring the water into the coffee pot, Will flicked the On switch with his thumb, listening to it hiss and start to percolate. He swallowed back a chuckle at Nigel's description of night to come, the corners of his mouth curling up with amusement.

"Daring deeds, cruel intentions and beautiful women… How very James Bond of you. Do you also have an evil nemesis with a penchant for doomsday devices?"

Looking through the few cabinets, Will managed to unearth two beaten mugs; brushing them off absently against his hip. The coffee smelled wonderful, bitter and dark, cutting through the salty richness of the sizzling bacon, as it started to cook.

When there was enough for two cups, he poured one for Nigel first, setting it on the counter beside where he was working.

"After this, if you want, I'll get out of your hair. Let you enjoy your leave of absence in peace."

___

Regretting he didn't thaw the package or taking his time to separate them into each slice, a hand holding the tong keeps prodding into the bubbling mixture of grease to bubble over as a last spew of the volcano while the other futilely tries to unwind the tightly coiled spine, still aching with flaring tension sparking like a flickering light bulb about to go out.

Oblivious to the scalding sensation whipping over the hardened skin and the stubborn locks of hair perforating through the flap of his lids, still heavy and threatening to shut with lingering lassitude of the night before. Although the recollected thoughts solidify inside the recess of his mind, he knows they wouldn't fully vanish; they will be manifested into invisible bars which he cannot pass through, holding him down in a web of admissions and acceptance.

Betrayal and forgiveness were as labyrinthine and undefinable as the concept of love. The sadness thrown away, the bundle of recharged raw emotion pouring out to cause a calamitous wreckage. The hunger within him, the physiological manifestation reminds him more to tend to the flayed strands that needs to be soldered and tied together to form a stronger bond.

The clean-up would be much more laborious than the reconstruction itself, as long as the demolished wreckage full of shattered thoughts, reflections and ligaments of strands of memories, still hooked through the appendages and apparatus like serrated teeth, gnarled with resentment and ruefulness.

At least this relapse went rather smoothly before he drowned himself in self-annihilation.

"Couldn't be fucking worse than what happened to both of us. I might have put too much fucking oil inside. Amazing thing, how we're able to cope with reflexes like taut springs and refract as psychological comfort washes over us."

Inwardly grumbling he didn't put a dab of butter along with the oil, he unceremoniously discards half of the bacon, as they become too far from being salvageable and consumable with charred crisp edges, which resembles corroded and rusted spear tips.

With half a dozen eggs cracked, he picks out few eggshells from beaten yolks with his fingers before flashing half-assed smirk towards Will's direction. The slick surface of the eggs reflect the puckish spark behind the hazel, looking deceptively innocent under unkempt locks. James Bond would laugh at Will's portrayal of him, an epitome of criminal mastermind, yet without a penchant for international threat that would cease the whole world's existence.

"The name escapes me, but I intend to dispose him in a foreseen future."

He banters and as he takes a sip of joe after giving Will a slanted nod, towards two equally inadequate looking pieces of ceramic plates by the dish drying rack, their origin questionable as visible stains along the chipped edge disputes their cleanliness.

"I would prefer my leave of absence with a suitable company. You don't fucking strike me as a type to sloth around the house.. Oh *nenorocit fiu de căţea* !"

The tipped end of the fry pan immediately combusts with soaring flashes of flame as the food becomes beyond unappealing scorched mess.

"I do know a fucking spectacular place where they sell Romanian pork soup."

Chapter 24

Will didn't cook as often as he should. Actually, if he were being wholly honest, he didn't *eat* as often as he should. A side effect of the untasty thoughts that generally poked around in his mind, making the thought of food.. Less than appealing. And, like most distracted bachelors, he had had his own fair share of scorched pans and forgotten pots, until it just seemed easier to live on toast and jam, or to grab something on his way home.

Watching Nigel move around the kitchen was a bit like a train wreck. Will smothered a laugh behind his hand as the other man flipped half the hopelessly scorched bacon out of the pan, tiny flecks of bubbling grease splashing up defiantly with every flick of the spatula.

"Gordon Ramsay, you are certainly not!" He laughed, picking up a questionably clean rag from its' place, draped over the handle of the narrow oven, "Hurricane Nigel, with the power to destroy a kitchen in five minutes, using three ingredients or less!"

Careful not to knock into Nigel, as he tried to do battle with their unruly breakfast, Will did his best to clean up the fragments of egg shell and bacon grease that littered the counter. In the history of potentially awkward mornings-after, this was one he would certainly remember.

With a whoosh, the pan suddenly caught flame; a few sooty grey streaks appearing on the wall behind the stove. Will jumped back from the flames, glancing around for *something* to put them out. "Aha!" He added, grabbing a large pot lid from the drain tray, and dropping it over the pan, smothering out the flames before they could do any real harm!

"You know, soup sounds great."

Retreating from the kitchen, Will picked his way across the ramshackle little apartment, picking up his shirt from the night before, and examining it in the bright, oily light that shone through the window. It, like his trousers, was creased from being worn damp; but they were dry, and that would have to be good enough.

Some people made an art out of staying at strange houses, and still managing to look suave the next morning… Will, with his wild hair, and rumpled clothes, couldn't even manage it on a regular day, much less one after a night like they'd had.

With his back to Nigel, Will tugged the borrowed sweater over his head, one hand self-consciously pressed over the wicked, heavy band of scar tissue on his stomach. It was one thing in the dark, he reminded himself; another entirely in the daylight.

"And I didn't have any plans.. so, if you consider me 'suitable company', then I'll darken your doorway for a bit longer."

—

This wreckage was exactly why he didn't spend unnecessary time and effort in the small kitchenette - not the most significant space he would reside and pour over his solitude in.

Most of the eating had been dispersed throughout the thresholds of the living room and bedroom, along the company of takeout boxes and a kitchen table, conveniently pushed off the center position of the narrow space, which had been transformed into a mini bar with hurdled gatherings of Tuica and Palinka, along with other hard liquors and spirits enough to question its true identity long ago.

The questionable transformation had everyone to wonder if he had been a chronic alcoholic or simply one who had been interested in mixology and bartending. He would align himself to be the latter, most judged him to be the former. He did have a high tolerance for the inducer of splitting headaches and ugly morning full of goop appendages and creaking bones.

He should've hired a housekeeper a long time ago - at least that bottle of stale oil with expiration date well past over a month and sorry looking clumps wouldn't end up in both of their stomachs.

"Isn't that the guy who shoves fucking bread slices between your head and screams ' *you're a fucking idiot sandwich* ?' I am just tempted to cause a fucking havoc upon the show just to have it filled up with the verbal entourage, giving him his own fucking medicine."

Moving out of the harm's way before he burns off an eyebrow or letting his favorite sweater go up in flames, he pores the gunk oily mess down the drain, before returning the pot lid to its rightful place. Another frypan ruined with the performance of the morning he would recall back for ages.

With a digressing downtilt of his lips, something between a pout and offering a moment of silence over the pan that met its unexpected demise upon calamitous dilapidation, he vows to from now on, he'd only stick to utilizing an oven or microwave, where there would be less involved factors for him to fuck things up.

"It's just a block in from the building. Lunch hour should be almost over, makes the fucking ideal time for us to make a visit - the owner should have a new batch by now."

Instinctively, his palm snakes above the gnarled giant caterpillar of an etched line cutting through his torso, the sensitive pink tingling with both unpleasant flutter and a contraction still foreign as his stomach makes another undignified protest of growling.

"You don't kindle the volatile fuel within my heart, so I consider you a suitable company, and you can un-unwelcome yourself through the door, you know, to spill your fucking guts, no pun intended."

Chapter 25

“That’s the right man, yeah. I don’t know about his own medicine, though. I’ve met a few chefs, some of them are downright scary.”

“How about we worry about lunch, before there’s any talk of *spilling guts* .” Will pulled a face, glancing over his shoulder at the other man, and arching a bemused eyebrow. “I think we’re both done enough of that for one lifetime.”

Nigel had seen his scars, and he had seen him; a quid pro quo trade that didn’t cost either of them their pride. If he were being honest, it was almost a relief just to acknowledge it; like taking back a piece of himself that Hannibal had tried his damnedest to slice out.

Their scars weren’t pretty, but they had survived them.

Pulling his shirt on, Will’s quick fingers made short work of the buttons, worrying a slightly loose one for a moment, before accepting that it was still attached well enough to wear. “So, how exactly does a Lithuanian man end up a 600 miles south in Romania?”

He didn’t ask *why* , that was a question for another time. Last night, he decided, they had done enough emotional bleeding.

“It’s just.. Out of the whole world, why did you decide to settle here?”

Sitting on the arm of the couch, Will fished out his sneakers, giving the mostly dry lining a cursory poke. Then would, like most things in his life, just have to be good enough. “Think I’ve got everything…Glasses, wallet… Phone..” He thought aloud, patting his pockets, “Alright, lead on!”

—

The previous night having been the most heart-to-heart ‘spilling guts’ he had with any individual, even defeating his own life and blood by a mile. The sweet relief still washes over him, albeit the little mishap in the kitchen. As wayward and stubborn he is, he could just slip back to his usual viands and call it another crumbled and sporadically torn off chapters, he doesn’t even want to recollect how many strikeout that particularly dramatic one had been.

“Being a food connoisseur or not, feeding oneself has been a particularly pivotal part for me and I don’t give a fuck about pretentious and ostentatious display of such theatrics and having omnipotent control over with their condescending demeanor.”

With the lingering gaze still on another diseased pan under his destructive hands, he finds a pair of Adidas track-pants perched haphazardly around the seam of the chair and sweeps them upward, the knees had already bagged out like dewlap, with the waistband stretched out, so much so that it already had lost its elasticity and refuses to stay up his hipbones.

“You know that’s not what I fucking meant. Confessions, secrets, that sorta thing. I’ve got shebangs of them pressed against the back of my fucking skull.”

Finding the binder clip rolling around one of the drawers, he takes a few inch off the waist and hides the folds under the light sweater he had been wearing, splattered with oily stains that make him smell more like the thick slab of bacon he would encounter shortly after. As if the garment had already collided with the pavement, the throngs of specks, dispersed around the front reminds him of the seeping deluge of rainwater and blood alike.

The whole world of himself had crashed down once and he had parted the one individual that would be his whole world, yet he still had the beaming light inside of him that had prevented his eternal entrance towards the detached and corroded gates which located a half a world away.

“Through the alleyways where strings of broken hearts, dark silences settle denser than the rich earth and eyes of wilted trees on bleached out deserts coexist, you seem to spread faster than fucking fungus when you’ve descended from having a bloody gold spoon in your mouth to being plucked in the eyes of an attacking monster.” Those despicable nineteen years had been the pillar-stone of his own becoming. Like a playing Russian roulette, the unpredictability and grim reality always turned him into a tickling time bomb, going from zero to hundred in a bare minute.

“What the fuck do you think? See for yourself. I live in the fucking midst of it.” Tugging the socks and adjusting right side up, he shuts the blind, as if the murky view didn’t deserve his full attention. The muddy slush, along with the unperturbed snow gives off a deceptive duplicity, just like his self had been helplessly and hopelessly divided into dualism; immaculacy and contagion of besmirched lackluster.

Tapping the gunk off from the caked soles of his boots, he tugs the laces, repeating the gesture with the flab also to shove his socked feet inside, jostling against the door-frame as he motors through the corridor with his distinctive unsettlement.

Chapter 26

The city was desperately cold, the chill seeping through the cracks in the windows, and leeching into the old brick and mortar that soldered the building together. What had been miserable slush the night before had frozen overnight; a thick layer of snow already turned muddy brown by the traffic of the morning. Their breath escaped their lips in puffs of fog, even before they had left the grimy staircase that lead the way down to ground level.

Will hadn't given much credit to the heating in the building, but he was grateful for it immediately after they stepped outside. Louisiana boys, he decided, were definitely not made for a Romanian winter.

With a shiver, Will gathered his coat more securely around him, hands jabbed deep into the pockets in a futile attempt of trapping a little heat around his fingers. Nigel, beside him in just a sweater and track pants, didn't seem to notice. *Damn invulnerable bastard* , he thought with a twinge of amused affection.

"Hmm.. I guess so. Have you lived here long?" He asked, trying to keep his feet towards the center of the sidewalk, where the balance of the snow had laready been tromped flat by passing boots. It seemed like a simple enough question; and one, he hoped, wouldn't earn him another snapped reply.

"I'm definitely no chef.." Will's voice slowed as he considered the thought that had skipped through the back of his mind. "I know how to cook, sure, but it's all simple stuff. I don't have any idea what half the things your brother cooked, were."

Because *damnit* , Will decided with a hard mental confirmation, he wasn't going to tiptoe around the mention of Hannibal. He wasn't Voldemort, able to be summoned by mention of name alone. Whatever else he was, he was just a man.

"That said, you mentioned soup. And that sounds *really* good right now." Will puffed out a breath of foggy white breath, through lips canted upwards in a calm, almost lazy smile. "I don't think food is the way to my heart, but on a day like today, it might not be a bad start."

—

He absolutely despised winter, not just because of the bone-chilling bitterness creeping onto the curves of each of the vertebrae, but the coalescing web of muddled monochromatic grayness and creaking muscles, especially those days with his overworked brain refusing to percolate the necessities and solidify the previous night's briefing. Although born of the same clothes, they're the only ones who didn't fear each other. Hannibal more so than him, as he had bored the scar - the associated feelings never left him like coagulated puss did.

Having endured much unforgiving Lithuanian winters and living a vagabond way as a dandelion puff blown away with a wisp of air. That experience shaped him as the yard yellowing over with them. His personality rubbing everywhere to leave the trace. There would be no need to put on a jacket or overcoat of some sorts. Like hardened foot that felt

like an elephant's hide, he was more than capable of enduring such pins and needles. Most of all, it made him felt alive.

The only visible perceivable sensation is the stinging wind turning fringes to tinge beet-like redness onto his sharp cheekbones. They would probably cut through the wind. If not, his effervescing heat emitting akin to a glowing bed of coal rekindled with what it seems to be a harbinger of a wildfire would.

"Twenty fucking years and counting. What can you do, the city's atmosphere seeps into you, as if coexisting and feeding off in a symbiotic relationship. I'm the fucking wilted tree, the sector I live in might be tainted with visible social hierarchy yet rampant across the crumbled architecture and web of deserted alleyways."

As if restrained and his head held by an invisible contraception, he maintains his gaze forward. The ugliness and weighty muddiness the last thing he needs to be layered upon his tainted past - of him already being corrupted by intemperance. A dope-fiend, bouncer, bartender with a flair of violence and killings. His rise to fame as a notorious criminal had been expected, as he had a penchant for exerting force and spatting out virulent words at any opposition. His eminence of committing myriads of transgressions and taking parts in unsanctioned smuggling of firearms and shipments of drugs, containers' full of them coming straight from South America.

"You've seen the exemplary display of failure. I have fucking confidence that you'd beat that easily," raising an amused tilt of eyebrow, a chuckle pushes through his throat, along with a copious amount of crystallized air, meeting the seeping scent of comfort, as they near the little quaint shop. "They're all fucking people. I'm sure what he said fish - they've been treated to look like a piece of fucking cod or bass, who the fuck knows."

Except the family-run store he frequents downstairs and few rundown joints he acquainted himself of being a regular, he doesn't hold the same utmost respect and appreciation for the professional chefs (including his brother), and the taste significantly automatized, instead of being tailored to his own penchant of striving for piquancy and spicy like the homely comfort cooking of the pork soup, heavy, rich and luscious in flavor. The citrusy scent cuts through the air as he beckons towards the store, he raises a hand towards the owner before a slashing smirk etches across his lips. "Then what *is* the fucking way to your heart?"

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